

The Present Impasse of the Idea of Progress

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“If our Western civilization were to collapse even more completely than it has done, and I were asked to say upon which of the sins of the world the judgment of God had come in so signal a manner, I should specify, as the most general of existing evils and the most terrifying in its results, human presumption and particularly

intellectual arrogance.”

Herbert Butterfield,
History and Human Relations,
p. 169.

FROM ST. AUGUSTINE'S *De Civitate Dei* (412-426), to Arnold Toynbee's contemporary *Study of History*, every serious historian has been involved in a dual problem: first, describing and deciphering human

events and social institutions and systems, as these shape the course of civilization, and secondly, finding a philosophical or religious solution to the mystery that surrounds the course and final "meaning" of history. There has never been any real doubt that the historian must describe and analyze the past. Whether the construction of a philosophy of history is a legitimate concern of the historian is a subject of considerable debate.

In recent years the most severe critics of philosophies of history, particularly of eighteenth-century rationalist and nineteenth-century idealist theories, have been religious skeptics and orthodox Christians. Agnostic academic historians, imbued with the scientific spirit and empirical method, have been satisfied to establish "objective" and "relative" historical truths. They have been content to show, tentatively, "how things truly happened," and have generally denied that as historians they are obliged to place any absolute meaning upon history. Likewise, Christian historians, humbled before the sense of mystery that surrounds man's temporal universe, have regarded history as at best only a secondary source of revelation, infinitely inferior to Scripture as a preceptor of moral wisdom. Like agnostic historians, they have used all their powers of reason to explain man's relationship to man. But where skeptics have regarded God as irrelevant to history, Christians have considered God's ways to man too complex and mysterious to be justified by mere natural reason. They have therefore considered it impious to assume that anyone has a secret pipe-line to God's mind, that it is delusive to spin speculative theories about the ultimate purposes of history.

In abjuring any rationalist or idealist philosophy of history, some secular and Christian historians have assumed naively that they were writing "pure" objective history, whereas generally they were merely exchanging the conscious philosophical idealism of the nineteenth century, which is now under severe attack, for their

own unvoiced philosophy of history. This point has been fully demonstrated in Professor Renier's excellent book, *History: Its Purpose and Method* (1950), and runs implicitly through Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* (1954). In the opening paragraph of Pieter Geyl's *Use and Abuse of History* (1955), it is refreshing to read: "In what follows I write not as a philosopher but as a historian. If I venture to deal with some general aspects of history, I shall not feel compelled to analyze all of my assumptions. No doubt a fundamental view of life in its relation to eternity directs my thinking, but I shall allow it to be deduced or guessed at from my treatment of the subject." Geyl has proved that today, quite as much as in the past, historians have abused history by claiming "to have Clio's authentic message." But since all history is written by men who necessarily have "a fundamental view of life," even when the claim is expressly denied, the dependence of history upon a philosophical viewpoint or position is evident. Even when he is least aware of it, every historian has his philosophy of history. This point must be firmly established before discussing the present impasse of the idea of progress, because "progress" is such a fundamental concept that practically every philosophy of history—, whether Christian, idealistic, Marxian, positivist, pragmatic or eclectic—, can be defined in terms of its relationship to some variation of the idea of progress.

It should be understood at the outset that there are two distinct all-inclusive conceptions of man's progress in history, one Christian and the other secular or materialist, and that despite some close historical relationships, particularly during the eighteenth century, in their principles and objectives they are today totally opposed to each other. Within both the Christian and materialist camps there is, of course, a great range of intellectual positions toward "progress," both as to its reality and the extent of its fulfillment in history. Although the triumph of one does not necessarily mean the total defeat of the other, the pres-

ent dilemma of the idea of progress applies particularly to the secular conception of progress.

The Christian idea of progress in history can be traced back at least to St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, which condemned one Christian conception of progress but also set forth the conditions for the growth of the conception which finally prevailed. The idea of progress as the modern secular world understands it is roughly two hundred years old. The ancient Greeks had no word for "progress" in either sense, because they conceived of man as involved in the process of temporal Nature, which was characterized by the cycle, the endless cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death. To the ancient Greeks and Romans the repetitious patterns in Nature, in man's private temporal affairs, and in the history of city-states, nations and empires, were taken as proof that mankind itself was dominated by the cycle of perpetual recurrences in Nature. Even Platonic idealists and Epicurean naturalists were in agreement that Time and Nature, being a cycle, were man's great enemies, that Time did not offer man the necessary means of fulfilling a glorious destiny in history, but was a ravager from which there was no escape. Probably the Greeks never possessed a real philosophy of history because to them Time had little spiritual significance. Time was an irrational element which punctuated the impermanent things that recurred within the cycle of events. The cyclical theory of history explains why so much of the literature and philosophy of the ancient world was dominated by the mood of fatalistic despair.

There were, indeed, a few suggestions of a theory of progress in ancient thought. Thucydides traced the growth of Athens from barbarism to civilized culture, but when Athens declined he returned to the cyclical theory. Lucretius also believed in a tentative conception of social progress until events drove him back into despair. Polybius thought the cycle of history applied only to political forms of govern-

ment, but that the Roman Empire, by combining monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, might transcend "the course appointed by nature" and achieve historical immortality. Yet at best the Romans were able to break away from the strict determinism of the cyclical theory of history by exalting the civic virtues of personal honor and patriotism. The Stoics taught that through these virtues a citizen perpetuated himself in the unfolding and dramatic life of the Empire, personified as a corporate tradition. But this Roman conception of history differed only in degree from the usual cyclical theory; it could never envision a conception of historical progress. Roman honor was limited to the free citizen, who was himself subordinated as a person to the common good of the Empire. Even before the conquest of the Empire by Christianity, the corroding acids of skepticism had removed the halo of historical immortality from the Empire. However broad the upswing of the cycle of history might seem, the ancients were convinced that Time would bring the Wheel of Fate around to man's inevitable defeat.

Against this dark, pagan, cyclical conception of history, Biblical Hebraic and Christian thought introduced the Messianic idea that man's life in temporal nature moves toward a significant future, a future that does not merely stand over Nature, but opens up at the end of finite Time into a supernatural eternity. This revolutionary conception of Time appeared first in man's individual life. But it was soon applied to his social life in the form of a linear conception of history and tentative theory of social progress. Undoubtedly, the seeds of this Christian conception of social progress germinated as a reaction within the Christian community against the excesses of zealous Christians, such as St. Cyprian, Tertullian, Porphyry, and Athanasius, who tended to interpret the Apocalypse literally and to protest against any compromise with pagan thought and society. Often the militant zeal of these Christians made them social revolutionaries. As God's elect, bent

upon establishing the new Jerusalem for His saints, they exalted "simple" Christianity, often sought out martyrdom, and were fiercely hostile to the whole secular order, culture and intellectual traditions of the Greco-Roman world. This aspiration for a pure Christian millenium reached its climax in the Fourth Century Donatist movement, and provoked an equally extreme reaction among certain other Christians.

Origen, Eusebius, Ambrose, and Prudentius sought not to destroy the pagan Empire, but to assimilate it into Christianity, to conquer it by converting it. They contended that the universal acceptance of Christian morality, dogma, and discipline would result in such good social consequences that ultimately a future utopian kingdom on earth would be assured. This Christian conception of social progress was justified by the appeal that God's will should be done on earth as it is in heaven. Social salvation was the approximation, on a mundane level, of the ultimate meaning of life beyond history, in personal salvation. This willingness on the part of Christians to cooperate with the Empire resulted, in the intellectual realm, in Origen's fusion of Greek philosophy and Christian theology, an achievement of enormous and lasting historical importance. The conversion of Constantine signaled the triumph of this Christian tradition in the West. The fulsome, almost idolatrous, flattery of Constantine by Eusebius, in his "Oration on the Tricennalia of Constantine," reveals the potential danger to Christianity in its attempt to absorb the Empire: the Kingdom of Christ, as a spiritual reality, could become identified with the secular kingdoms of this world. Here in essence is the Gnostic heresy, which would make Christianity serve the ends of those who would seek to establish a terrestrial paradise.

St. Augustine's *The City of God* is the culmination of his intellectual battles not only against pagan Rome, but also against the incipient heresies in the Christian traditions of Tertullian and Origen. St. Augustine readily saw the grave danger of the

Gnostic heresy. Through the application of Christianity to social affairs men would come to accept Christianity not because of its truth as spiritual revelation, but because it was materially useful, socially convenient or culturally brilliant; in short, because it was an instrument of social progress. In time these utilitarian Christians would become Christian Utilitarians. They would not argue that social progress followed from accepting the truths of Christian revelation, but that acceptance of Christianity depended upon proof of the truth of its revelations through evident social progress. What was even worse, this pragmatic Christian idea of social progress implied a theory of poetic justice, in which God was expected to make the meek inherit the earth by showering material and social rewards upon the faithful. Under the theory of poetic justice, how could men distinguish the things of God from the things of Caesar? Furthermore, Christians who made social progress depend upon the acceptance of Christianity, or who believed that in worldly affairs God was on the side of the righteous, or who in any way identified the kingdom of God on earth with the material and social welfare of the Empire, were likely to reject Christianity as false when the worldly interests and civil order to which they gave allegiance failed or was destroyed. This was precisely what happened when the Germanic barbarians invaded the Empire. Because of his doctrine of original sin and awareness of the power of evil, St. Augustine was skeptical that individual Christian sanctity would ever become widespread and lead to man's social perfection. He insisted strongly that the mundane destiny of man is ever uncertain, unstable, and unpredictable, that virtue may fail and wickedness succeed, that no necessary or logical connection marks man's personal spiritual destiny and his temporal affairs in history. Against Eusebius's identification of the City of God with the Roman Empire, St. Augustine reasserted the messianic Christian dogma that the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world.¹

St. Augustine was equally decisive in rejecting the opposite heresy of the Donatists. Although he never paid patriotic tribute to the Empire, and always regarded pagan Rome as "the second Babylon," he had little sympathy with the revolutionary millennium aspirations of the Donatists. His spirit of cooperative loyalty toward the Empire was sincere, and included an acceptance of the structure, culture, and thought of the secular state. As Etienne Gilson has pointed out in *God and Philosophy*, St. Augustine, like Origen, interpreted Christian Scripture in the light of his early Platonism. If his sharp contrast between the City of God and the City of Man appears too severe to modern man, if he condemns the secular state as founded on pride, injustice and selfishness, it is important to note that even in an age when his condemnation of the state was justified he still values the City of Man and the achievements of society as part of the natural order. He maintained the vital dualism of Church and State and insisted, against the Donatists, that Christianity makes good citizens. But as the highest end of man is not temporal prosperity, but the salvation of souls, he inverted the Gnostic defense of Christianity as useful to society and maintained that a just society is necessary as a means to fulfill the temporal and spiritual ends of man.

This social and spiritual exaltation of man, this emphasis upon the personal dignity of each individual, is uniquely Christian, and is central to St. Augustine's rejection of the pagan cyclical theory of history. To St. Augustine the redemption of man does not take place outside of history, but within the corporate life of the civil community and the Church, both of which are involved in the historical process. The central act of Christianity—the Incarnation—, was itself a Divine intervention into the course of secular history, and introduced an absolute spiritual value to its processes. St. Augustine's analysis of the destiny of man in time and eternity is the classical expression of the Christian

philosophy of history as progress. Social progress became possible because man, as a spiritual being, was no longer the victim of finite time and the cycle of history. The spiritual growth of free men in the corporate life of the Church and society converted history into a creative process that possessed organic unity and continuity. It is doubtful that St. Augustine applied his Christian conception of Time and history to the secular state. His doctrine of grace and original sin prevented him from holding out much hope for the redemption of the City of Man. To a great extent he compensated for the severities of his doctrines against the natural order by making love and charity the highest Christian virtues. But the possibility of social improvement, however slow and incomplete, lay in the dynamic spiritual power of the Church. St. Augustine's Christian conception of history made possible the social ideals of justice, liberty, and good order which have characterized Western civilization since his time.

Had it not been for Christianity, it is quite probable that the modern secular theory of social progress would never have been conceived, or that it would have developed its Utopian objectives in quite another way. Among others, Carl Becker has indicated in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932), how much the "Enlightenment" doctrine of progress is a secularized inversion of the Augustinian interpretation of history. The hope of better and better social consequences through man's increasing control over his spiritual and historical destiny is common to the Christian and modern secular faith in progress. The vital differences are in the source and substance of revealed truths, in the substitution of science for religion and of a deterministic and materialistic conception of man and the universe for the spiritual dogmas and moral values of Christianity. These differences are so absolute that it is impossible for anyone to believe both in Christianity (or any

theistic religion) and in the modern secular theory of progress.

For the past two hundred years the secular idea of progress has been based entirely on the assumption that the methods of the physical sciences, which have given man so much power and control over the laws and processes of Nature, can also be applied to man himself, to his social, political and cultural problems and actions, for the purpose of bringing the processes and laws of social history under his control. The consistent theme of every modern believer in material progress has been that through scientific knowledge and its practical application in industry, farming, medicine, economics, law, politics, the arts, education and morals, historical processes are modified and improved, that history is made creative, that Time alone is needed for man to win complete control over history and redeem himself from every personal and social evil.

The ideas, sentiments and systems of thought of the most prominent modern philosophers, scientists, and historians have combined in various ways to enrich and reinforce this faith in secular progress. The beginnings of the theory may be traced back to Bacon's renewed insistence on the inductive method and to Descartes's skepticism and rationalism.² Hobbes, the first real positivist and utilitarian in English thought, contributed the idea that mathematics supplied the only useful and valid method of dealing with social problems. Locke, his chief political enemy and philosophic imitator, popularized the empirical-rational method among the French *philosophes* and Encyclopaedists, who constructed the theoretical and practical synthesis of the idea of progress for the eighteenth century.³ Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681), combined St. Augustine's conception of history with the critical-minded humanism of the Renaissance. Turgot, in his *Plan de deux discours sur l'histoire universelle*, secularized Bossuet's Christian epochs of man into the epochs of the hunting era, the nomadic era, the agricultural era, and

finally the era of government. Condorcet, in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de l'esprit humain* (1793), refined upon Turgot and argued that as the physical objects and social arrangements within man's empirical perceptions were perfected through science and education, man's intellectual, cultural and moral nature would automatically improve. In the long quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, Condorcet represents the triumph of the modern thesis that man's increasing knowledge of the universe was advancing toward perfection. Bentham taught that only that which is scientifically true is economically and socially useful for the greatest pleasure (good) of the greatest number. Comte added that nothing exists, is true or meaningful, unless it is subject to scientific description, measurement, and prediction. Darwin's theory of man's biological evolution in Nature was translated to mean that man's social and cultural nature in history was also necessarily evolving. In Germany, after Niebuhr and Ranke, the nineteenth century became the greatest age of historical studies, resulting in a revolution in man's perspective which Lord Acton considered more important than the Italian Renaissance. The historical method was applied to every branch of humanistic learning, resulting in a unique historical self-consciousness concerning temporal events that has become the dominant characteristic of modern social thought. Marx adopted the Hegelian dialectic to combine the idea of progress with materialism. Rousseau, who abandoned his original Calvinist belief in universal depravity in favor of the theory of progress, retained enough faith in intuitive feeling and sentiment as the basis for morality to give the whole emotional tone and temper to the secular idea of progress. Naturalists like Herbert Spencer were no less infused with Rousseau's type of sensibility than idealists like Kant and Hegel. There were, of course, many other influences, both as causes and effects, upon the idea of progress. But the main currents of ideas and events all converged

upon the cardinal conviction that science was bringing the laws of both Nature and history under man's complete control.

The following passages by Charles Beard forcefully illustrate the enormous contrast between the ancient pagan, Christian, and modern secular conceptions of Time and history, and the essential objective of the modern idea of progress:

It was not until commerce, invention, and natural science emancipated humanity from thralldom to the cycle and to the Christian epic that it became possible to think of an immense future for mortal mankind, of the conquest of the material world in human interest, of providing the conditions for a good life on this planet without reference to any possible hereafter. . . . Technology is the fundamental basis of modern civilization, supplies a dynamic force of inexorable drive, and indicates the methods by which the progressive conquest of nature can be effected. . . . Technology . . . constitutes the supreme instrument of modern progress . . . [Through] technology . . . what was once Utopian becomes actuality. What appears to be impossible may be surmounted. The ancient theory that mankind revolves in a vicious circle is destroyed by patent facts. The medieval notion of a static society bound to rule-of-thumb routine is swept into the discard of events.⁴

Briefly defined, it [progress] implies that mankind, by making use of science and invention, can progressively emancipate itself from plagues, famines, and social disasters, and subjugate the materials and forces of the earth to the purposes of the good life—here and now. . . . [Progress is] a synthesis of all explorations, scientific, economic, and social, of all energies devoted to subduing matter and force to ordered human ends. . . . It is a theory that the lot of mankind on this earth can be continually improved by the attainment of exact knowledge and the subjugation of the material world

to the requirements of human welfare. . . . Its controlling interest is in this earth, in our time, not in a remote heaven to be attained after death. . . . It is founded on the belief that civilization is on the threshold of time.⁵

These passages clearly reveal that the modern secular theory of progress is, in essence, a religion of materialism. Beard further defines it as "a philosophy of history" and "a gospel of futurism," which aims to establish "a society secular in motive, dynamic in economy, scientific in intellectual interest." (It should be noted here that the true antithesis between Beard's conception of progress and Christianity does not lie in any opposition between Christianity and science or technology, but between Christianity and materialism, which converts the fruits of science and technology from the economic means to the final end of life.) Material progress is offered by Beard as an alternative to Christianity and all theistic religion. In the religion of material progress, there is no personal spiritual redemption beyond finite Time, but rather a social redemption of the species through Time. History, therefore, is not something to be desperately avoided, as the ancients thought, nor does it merely complicate and perplex the ultimate meaning of life, as Christianity implied. To the secular materialist history as progress is something gladly to be fulfilled; history is itself the clear and ultimate meaning of life. In the religion of material progress, history and science replace philosophy and theology, and Time becomes God. Time is not something that the believer in material progress feels he must explain; Time is that by which he explains all things. If the conquest of all ignorance, disease, poverty, tyranny, war, etc., is contingent upon acquiring greater knowledge through scientific research, the believer in progress through materialism is confident that, given enough grace through Time, mankind can solve every unsolved social problem and bring historical processes so completely

under control that in Time mankind will be redeemed. Since Time has the most vital position in secular "progress," the question of whether it is later than the believer in material progress thinks, whether Time is running out and "progress" must have a stop, is very central in considering the present impasse of the modern idea of progress. Time, therefore, should not be out of mind in examining the theory of material progress since the first World War, in the light of the historical circumstances in which man finds himself today.

That great watershed of contemporary civilization, the first World War, more than confirmed the worst fears of skeptics toward the idea of secular progress, disillusioned many of the faithful, and profoundly modified the hopes and doctrines of moderate and ardent believers. The so-called "gloomy Dean" Inge of St. Paul's, who mercilessly pilloried the prophets of material progress, was able to say after 1918 that nothing he had ever predicted was nearly half so bad as what had actually happened.⁶ If the pre-war "gloomy Dean" appeared as a bouncy optimist in 1920, the dark night of the soul engulfed many whose faith in progress had suddenly been shriveled by the red blast of war. This mood particularly dominated the defeated nations, where moral and economic collapse and the dissolution of old national boundaries and political institutions produced a fatalistic despair best expressed by Spengler. There is little doubt that in publishing *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* during the war (1917), Spengler was projecting the imminent defeat of Germany into a European catastrophe. Spengler's post-war publication in two volumes (1920-22), called attention to the main thesis of his work. It is a common mistake to dismiss Spengler as a prophet of gloom because he denied progress as an adolescent illusion and predicted the inevitable decay of the West. Nevertheless, his thoroughly unhistorical denial of the Christian contribution to Western civilization, and his deterministic-materialistic-relativistic conception of a

segmented European culture, are not merely the ingredients in a pessimistic revival of the old cyclical theory of history.⁷ Spengler's work reveals that he was not merely a skeptic of the modern idea of progress, but a profoundly disillusioned believer who had turned against the theory with the vengeance of despair. Spengler's shallow pessimism may better be regarded as the final disillusionment of the optimistic illusions of Kant's idealism and Hegel's nationalism, the fusion of which had led Germans to identify "progress" with the fulfillment of their national destiny.

Perhaps the most intelligent and significant reactions to the first World War occurred among a group of moderate English humanists at Oxford and Cambridge universities. In 1916 they delivered a series of twelve lectures, later published as a book, edited by F. S. Marvin, called *Progress and History* (Oxford, 1924), on various aspects of the secular theory of progress. Although each writer expressed his unflinching faith in "progress," the general sobriety and occasional despair in these essays stands in the sharpest contrast to the optimism of pre-war pronouncements on "progress." All of them admitted, as Arthur Ekirch again admitted in 1944, that "progress has been set back by the spread of war." The essay by L. P. Jacks, "Moral Progress," is characteristic of the sober revision in mood and ideas which the war effected in the theory. Jacks advised men to "believe in moral progress, but do not believe in too much of it," because morally "we are still in a neolithic age, not brutes indeed any longer, and yet not so far outgrown the brutish stage. . . . The present war . . . has revealed us to ourselves as nothing else in history has ever done, and it has revealed . . . that moral progress is not nearly so advanced as we thought it was." Although Jacks felt that science was not discredited by the war, in his analysis of the role of science in the war he grasped an idea that has become increasingly paramount in contemporary thought:

Had it not been for the progress of science, which has enormously increased the wealth of the world, it is doubtful if this war, which is mainly a war about wealth, would have taken place at all. Or if a war had broken out, it would not have involved the appalling destruction of human life and property we are now witnessing—such that, within a space of two years, about six million human beings have been killed, thirty-five millions wounded, and wealth destroyed to the extent of about fifteen thousand millions sterling—though some say it is very much more. Science taught us to make this wealth: science has also taught us how to destroy it. When one thinks of how much of this is attributable to the progress of science, I say it is *permissible to raise the question* whether man is a being who can safely be entrusted with that control over the forces of nature which science gives him. What if he uses this power, as he plainly can do, for his own undoing? . . . It is conceivable that the progress of science might involve for us no progress at all. It might be . . . a step toward the self-destruction of the human race.⁸

Having noted that science gives man power but not moral wisdom, Jacks's moderate faith in progress permitted him to raise, but not to examine critically, the whole question of man's moral nature. Like all his academic colleagues, Jacks dismissed this momentary fear as a failure of nerve, and reaffirmed his belief in the natural goodness of man.

However, the great War caused most moderate progressivists to discard totally the nineteenth-century belief, best expressed by Herbert Spencer, that social progress was both inevitable and proportionate to greater and greater social heterogeneity. Therefore, the unwavering theme of the Oxford and Cambridge humanists was that the pre-war conception of progress was too heterogeneous and circumscribed by local and national interests, that a more

“organic,” “universal,” “completely human, not merely nationalist” conception of social progress, in which man willed progress through conscious collective effort, would yet redeem mankind. This voluntaristic and collectivistic modification of the theory was seized upon by the most ardent believers in secular progress, such as John Dewey, Charles Beard, J. H. Robinson and H. G. Wells, and applied vigorously to new areas of thought.

To appreciate fully both the catastrophic impact of the first World War and the changes it effected in the secular idea of progress, it is necessary to recall how profoundly, in the nineteenth century, idealists like Hegel and naturalists like Spencer had believed progress was absolutely inevitable. Hegel believed the principle of progressive perfection was inherent in the course of world history:

Historical change, seen abstractly, has long been understood generally as involving a progress toward the better, the more perfect. Change in nature, no matter how infinitely varied it is, shows only a cycle of constant repetition. . . . Only the changes in the realm of Spirit create the novel. This characteristic of Spirit suggested to man a feature entirely different from that of nature—the desire toward *perfectibility*. . . . The principle of *development* implies further that it is based on an inner principle, a presupposed potentiality, which brings itself into existence. This formal determination is essentially the Spirit whose scene, property, and sphere of realization is world history.⁹

Spencer expressed the same conviction in terms more crude and concrete:

When it is shown that this advancement is due to the working of a universal law, and that in virtue of that law it must continue until the state we call perfection is reached, then the advent of such a state is removed out of the region of probability into that of certainty. . . .

Progress . . . is not an accident, but a necessity . . . [and as] the things we call evil and immorality disappear . . . so surely must man become perfect. . . . Progress is not an accident, not a thing within human control, but a beneficent necessity.¹⁰

By way of the dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to Hegel and by way of simple mathematical logic to Spencer, history was a vast escalator, like H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*, on which man, with or against his will, was being carried by Time onward and upward forever. The rate of acceleration near the top of this supposed upsweep of history was far greater and smoother than among the non-scientific and un-industrialized Ancients, or among unenlightened Christians. The first World War shattered forever the easy optimism of this conception of the secular theory of progress.

By way of salvaging their philosophy of history, most believers in secular progress interpreted the Great War as an unfortunate accident, a collision in the dark resulting from a miscalculation of man's historical development. But the extent, horror, and futility of the destruction made it impossible for Beard, Dewey, Wells, and other social theorists to regard social progress as any longer inevitable. All agreed that such a war must never be allowed to occur again, and that therefore the naive "policy of drift" which had characterized the deterministic theory of Hegel and Spencer had to be replaced by a hard-headed, "realistic" belief in progress, in which man's conscious collective control over events would be exercised scientifically. Where Hegel and Spencer and the nineteenth century had said man *must* have progress whether or not he wants it, Beard and Dewey said man *can* have progress only if he wills it.¹¹ A voluntaristic conception of progress based upon materialism, which insists that men must will to be saved in their social life, may at first appear strangely anachronistic in the mouths of social theorists who deny man's

free will. The paradox is readily resolved, however, when we realize that what is really meant by "must will" is that man must be forced to will progress. How was this to be done? In general, Wells and Dewey held that, beyond the original elements necessary for social progress, man had to be scientifically conditioned to will progress in his thinking processes and values. This required an enormous development of psychology and semantics, applied practically in an expanded mass educational program. Wells and Dewey put forth the thesis that a universally valid scientific education would create a universal perspective that would destroy sectarian parochialism and provincial nationalism, thus ridding the world of heterogeneous religious and political divisions, and making it possible for man to collectively will himself to progress.

The first World War made believers in progress aware that an improved external physical and social environment was not enough to guarantee "progress" while men's twisted and immature mental processes allowed them to be led by their emotions into disastrous wars. Therefore the achievements of physical science and sociology had to be supplemented vitally by psychology and a scientifically accurate use of language. The enormous interest in psychology and semantics since 1920 can largely be attributed to this modification in the secular theory of progress. Practically every contemporary textbook in the humanities and social sciences reflects this interest. Beginning with James Harvey Robinson's *The Mind in the Making* (1921), and running through Walter Lippman's *A Preface to Morals* (1929), Stuart Chase's *The Tyranny of Words* (1938), and Harry A. Overstreet's *The Mature Mind* (1949), the presses of America published a staggering number of works aimed at conditioning man's mental processes and responses to words according to strictly scientific truths. The sub-title of Robinson's book, "the relation of intelligence to social reform," summarized the conviction that the one additional thing necessary for social salvation

was scientifically clear thinking and communication.

It should be self-evident that each of these dogmas in the reformed religion of secular progress has been thoroughly discredited by historical events since the first World War. The failure of the League of Nations and the rise of new and more violent forms of totalitarian nationalism have invalidated the hopes for greater homogeneity and voluntaristic cooperation. Indeed, the very weapons the progressivists had hoped would be used to cure man of all his former social evils were converted into instruments of still greater inhumanity and destruction. Psychology and semantics, which were supposed to emancipate man from the slavery of his egocentric illusions and passions, were developed into powerful instruments of mental torture and political propaganda. In place of the progressivists' universally valid scientific education, new scientific techniques in mass deceit and indoctrination for evil were perfected. The desire for greater homogeneity and "conscious group action" was best achieved in Germany and Russia, and it led to evils far worse than those it was supposed to abolish. The desire to attain racial purity and political uniformity led the Nazis to murder millions of innocent people. In Soviet Russia, the desire for economic homogeneity led to the extermination of all who opposed the collective farm programs and series of industrial five-year plans; the attempt to establish atheism as the religion of the homogeneous Communist state has led to a barbarous persecution of all organized religion. In the Western world the progressivist attack upon *laissez-faire* economics was continued long after the real danger had passed from excessive individualism to the "conscious group action" of a far more intrusive political collectivism. In one form or degree the modern world has been swept toward homogeneity or engulfed by collectivism, and the end result is clearly not another step toward Utopia, as the believers in secular progress had hoped, but the unjust limitation or exter-

mination of man's traditional natural and civil rights to his own life, liberty, property and security. The last three decades have witnessed a world-wide economic depression, the growth of totalitarian tyrannies as despotic as any known to man, the enormous growth, even in free societies, of centralized political authority, and another and even more destructive world war. To climax these catastrophic events, the atom and hydrogen bombs have made St. Augustine's words increasingly prophetic: "And for the injury of men, how many kinds of poison, how many weapons and machines of destruction have been invented." Professor Herbert Butterfield has summarized the terrible dilemma in which contemporary man finds himself:

Our generation is not only peculiarly one of great wars, but . . . now more than ever before in history we must live with the possibility of war in mind. In the devising of the apparatus of destruction our scientists must take care not to be outstripped for a moment by their colleagues in a country that may become our enemy. Now all nerves must be stretched all the time and every ruffling of the diplomatic waters must be a crisis. The very means that we have taken to establish peace and internationalism have made the situation worse, with less foothold for hope than in the years before 1914.¹²

Clearly, the cold, clammy, and undeniable revelations of recent Time and history, and the desperate circumstances in which man finds himself today, militate against the revised secular theory of progress.

To those who will admit all these points and still believe in the religion of secular progress, the apostasy of H. G. Wells may serve as an illuminating illustration of the impasse to which the thoughtful among the faithful have been driven more and more since 1918. Nobody better exemplified in his intellectual life the history of the modern idea of progress since just before the first World War than H. G. Wells. Prac-

tically everyone used to be familiar in his adolescence or youth with Well's *The Outline of History* (1920), which sold by the millions during the decade that followed the first World War. Its success resulted in part from the abounding confidence of Wells that he had the golden key to the scriptures of history, which multitudes of disillusioned people were anxious to possess, and which he was able to impart. The philosophy of history which Wells presented was an unblushing version of the secular idea of progress. Christopher Dawson has summarized the tradition of thought to which Wells belonged: "Wells was the last of the encyclopaedists—a belated child of the Enlightenment who still preserved its faith in progress and humanity and science with all its optimism and naïveté, even in the hostile climate of post-war Europe."¹³ *The Outline of History* is infused with the crude underlying assumption that despite some lag resulting from reactionary Medievalism, human world events have followed a constantly evolving and ascending cosmic curve, with only a few minor dips to break man's smooth and inevitable progress to Utopia. Perhaps not everyone has yet forgotten Wells' Utopian books, in which the fictitious accounts of man's future control of the cosmos were taken more than half seriously as inspired prophecies and visions of the shape of things to come. Like many other forward-looking social theorists, Wells abandoned the deterministic for the voluntaristic theory after 1918. Far more keenly than most of his contemporaries, Wells realized that this change implied the necessity of bringing man's vast scientific and technological power under moral control. The vital factor of Time made this necessity extremely urgent. Wells underlined the urgency of the problem in his famous statement, toward the end of *The Outline of History*, that mankind's fate would be decided in "a race between education and catastrophe." This phrase was repeated endlessly by the theorists of progressive education, who generally had no more suspicion of

what Wells really meant by it than they know what anyone ever meant by anything. Yet Wells himself was keenly aware of the possibility that catastrophe, through the destructive power of science, might destroy civilization: "We cannot tell yet how much of the winnings of catastrophe still remain to be gathered in, what vast harvests of wasted lives still await the reaper." The economic and military events of the thirties and forties left no doubt in Wells' own mind as to who would ultimately win this desperate race.

At the time of his death in 1946, Wells published his last book called, significantly, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. From this book one might well conclude that Wells' early Utopian books, his *New Worlds for Old* and *Shape of Things to Come*, must have been written for *Babes in the Darkling Wood* who lived in the *Country of the Blind*. For in his last book Well's faith in progress in any form fell completely to pieces. The Gothic night of black despair contained in Wells' last testament reveals the impasse to which even the voluntaristic theory of secular progress has finally led:

If his [Wells's] thinking has been sound, then this world is at the end of its tether . . . He [Wells] has come to believe that that congruence with mind, which man has attributed to the secular process, is not really there at all . . . A remarkable queerness has come over life. It is as if the law of gravitation no longer functioned in a physical world. Everything is moving in every direction with increased velocity. Mankind has reached an impasse and there is no way around, or above or through this impasse. It is the end.¹⁴

In his final epitaph for man, "doomed formicary," and in his conclusion that "man is at the end of his tether," Wells was simply drawing out the logical end to which the contemporary facts of history had pushed his faith in the idea of progress.

The truth is, however, that not mankind but the secular religion of progress is at

the end of its tether. Beard's hope that "a concept of history as catholic as the idea of progress will not be dropped in the march of events,"¹⁵ is, of course, still being realized among green juveniles, enthusiastic undergraduates, and metaphysically insane professors of sociology and education, who take their private logical speculations as the sole measure of all reality. Nevertheless, except among the ignorant-wise and those impervious or indifferent to the tragedy in recent history, the concept of history as progress has been dealt a mortal wound. Modern man finds himself in historical circumstances that are themselves the most eloquent refutation of the progressive philosophy of history. This is a more powerful argument against the secular idea of progress than any dialectical analysis could bring to bear upon its illusions.

Apart from the untenableness of the secular idea of progress, few will deny that there is a unique crisis in the twentieth century. Our bloody era of wars and revolutions is writ large in the image of Hobbes's philosophy. Amid the cracked ruins of a civilization built upon a reasonable recognition and respect for the normative ethics of Natural Law, with it attendant veneration of inalienable human rights, Hobbes's man in a state of nature, backed by all the power of modern science and the Leviathan State, stalks and works his arbitrary will. Yet the real horror of our time is not so much world-wide wars and revolutions as the degree of wilful deceit, brutality, and blasphemy that has attended these upheavals. The civilized past has never had anything comparable to modern man's denial of the moral law in his social relationships, his general contempt for contracts and agreements, his series of undeclared and unprovoked wars, his perfection of techniques of torture, deceit and propaganda, his wholesale extermination through persecution and concentration camps of entire races, nations, and established institutions, his eagerness to embrace brutal racial and economic theories, his veneration

of power as an end in itself. Men have endured most of these things in the past, but never to such a degree. It is no longer possible to dismiss such barbarism lightly, as the evil work of a few power-mad men who have abused science. Certainly science is not the *cause* of such human depravity, nor can science do anything to control the evil which a few men can inflict upon mankind. The assurance of our physical scientists that an atomic or germ war, begun by a few evil men, could destroy perhaps eighty per cent of our civilization, makes it impossible to believe any longer that more science and technology will work our salvation. The real impasse of the secular idea of progress is man's doubt that civilization can endure another war.

Except for the most mentally agape, the recognition of this impasse has killed the last possibility of avoiding ugly reality by interpreting man's recent social tragedies as slight digressions from the assumed norms of progress, as dips in the upward curve of human events, which further scientific knowledge and a more thorough application of the scientific method will soon eliminate. With the visible ruins of two world wars around them, even ordinary men are no longer gladdened that science is creating greater and greater power. Today, living under the constant threat of the atomic bomb or worse, the significance of Bury's statement is clear to all: "If there was good cause for believing the earth would be uninhabitable in 2000 or 2100, the doctrine of progress would lose its meaning and would automatically disappear." In brief, men crave not more power, but more moral wisdom, and a personal ultimate meaning in life, and these are not to be found in science or the idea of material progress, but in religion. As Jacques Maritain has said, the events of contemporary history are narrowing man's choices more and more to one of two roads: the road to the slaughterhouse, or the road to Calvary. But the dying illusion of material progress will continue to drag its slow length along

our century until men recognize, or history teaches them again, that the scientific method is but a penultimate process, and that the City of God, for each man and for all mankind, lies beyond the known frontiers of nature and disputed ramparts of history,

in religion. For religion alone can give man the sense of an ultimate reality, infused with true sensitivity, charity, and love, which supplies the richest meaning every man finds in his and every man's and every thing's existence.

NOTES

¹For an excellent brief account of the Christian theory of progress which St. Augustine rejected, and the chief arguments against the theory, see Theodore E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (June, 1951), pp. 346-347.

²The best general study of the secular theory, J. B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress* (1920), does not do justice to the origins of the theory and is often superficial and inadequate. Bury was anticipated on the secular idea of progress by Ferdinand Brunetière, in "La Formation de l'idée de progrès au xviii siècle," [1892], in his *Études critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française* (Paris, 1922), pp. 183-250. Professor Carlton J. H. Hayes, who makes a strong case for the Christian contribution to the ideals of civil justice and liberty in Western civilization, objects to Bury's limited historical perspective: "It has been claimed by some historical scholars, most notably perhaps by the late Professor Bury of Cambridge, that our idea of progress is not very old; that it did not emerge until the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Possibly this is true. It is curious, however, that the Enlightenment and its idea of progress arose and flourished in a traditionally Christian, not Moslem or Buddhist or Hindu, environment. And no matter when the *idea* became prevalent, the *fact* of progress has long been an observable feature of the Western world." *Christianity and Western Civilization*, p. 46.

³For a brief account of this point see Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932).

⁴Charles Beard, introduction to J. B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress* (New York, 1931), xi, xx, xxii and xxiii.

⁵Charles Beard, *A Century of Progress*, p. 3-6.

⁶See W. R. Inge, *The Idea of Progress* (Oxford, 1920).

⁷This is Christopher Dawson's interpretation of Spengler's theory in *Dynamics of World History* (1956), pp. 374-389.

⁸L. P. Jack's "Moral Progress," in *Progress and History*, pp. 135 and 141. Jack's italics. Before 1914 those who had dared to question the absolute benevolence of science in human affairs were dismissed as reactionary obstructionists on the road to the future.

⁹Hegel, *Reason in History* (The Liberal Arts Press: New York, 1953), pp. 68-69. Pieter Geyl's comment on Hegel's philosophy of history is worth noting: "Since Augustine there had been no such ambitious and impressive philosophy of history . . . and no doubt Hegel owed to the *De Civitate Dei* his basic idea of a purposeful development, a development that would bear out God's scheme. It is St. Augustine secularized." *Use and Abuse of History*, p. 35.

¹⁰See George Hildebrand, *The Idea of Progress* (University of California Press, 1949), pp. 433-447.

¹¹See Charles Beard, introduction to J. B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress*, xxix-xxxii. Carlton Hayes also distinguished between a deterministic and voluntaristic Christian conception of progress: "Progress is not automatic; it depends on human will and aspiration." *Christianity and Western Civilization*, p. 63.

¹²Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London, 1951), p. 38.

¹³Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, p. 367.

¹⁴Herbert G. Wells, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (New York, 1946), pp. 1-4.

¹⁵Charles Beard, introduction to J. B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress*, xxviii.